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Names of Hutong in Kaifeng: A Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract

The common narrow lane in ancient cities of North China, the *hutong*, has long been of interest to scholars. However, the limited onomastic research on hutong names is mostly confined to Beijing, leaving the toponymic landscape of other well-known ancient cities underexplored. In view of this gap, this study, based on 67 hutong names and 201 non-hutong names of Kaifeng, explores the phonetic, morphological, and semantic features of these hodonyms. It is our hope that the findings of this study will improve public awareness of toponyms and provide references for toponymic research in China.

Keywords: onomastics, hodonymy, hutong, linguistics, placenames, China

Introduction

The *hutong* 胡同, also known as *linong* 里弄, *xiangnong* 巷弄, or *xiang* 巷 in different regions in China, refers to a narrow lane or alleyway that connects the residential neighborhood to the main street or road (Zhang 2004). Prior research (Zhang 2016; Wong 2010; Campanella 2008) suggests that the inception of this term dates back to the Yuan 元 dynasty (1206–1271 CE) and originates from the Mongolian word *hottog* 'water well', indicating an urban residential area established around the water well.

The hutong, an essential component of the community life of ancient cities in China, constitutes an important means of transportation for and delineates the spatial layout of a city, and also gives rise to historical relics, cultural heritages, and social customs. Given its significance, the hutong has remained a popular research topic among scholars. To date, researchers have approached the hutong from different perspectives. For example, He (2017) ascertained Beijing hutong dwellers' cultural psychology during rehabilitation, revealing the possible link between the residents' identity crisis and the reconstruction of hutongs. Mao (2018) conducted a detailed analysis of the causes underlying the commercialization of hutongs in Beijing and proposed solutions to ensure the sustainable development of hutong-based tourism. Yang (2018) examined the origins, development, and historical changes of hutongs in Beijing, aiming to promote their cultural value and better preservation.

Meanwhile, in recent years, studies on toponyms, which carry rich social, cultural, and historical connotations, have gained impetus in the context of China (Hargett 2021; Zhu et al. 2018; Chen 2020). However, to date, only a limited number of linguistic studies have touched upon the hutong name. For instance, Kratochvil (1982) investigated the stress shift mechanism in Chinese by analyzing the tonal patterns of hutong names in Beijing. Zhang (2004) reviewed the evolution of hutong names in Beijing from a socio-linguistic perspective, revealing the link between the changes in hutong naming patterns and societal changes over time. Kałużyńska (2008) ascertained the renaming of hutong names in Beijing after 1949 and found that their current names are mostly the result of substitution by homophones. This body of work shows that further research into the linguistic, historical, and socio-cultural aspects of hutong names is needed to gain a better understanding of the topic. However, as can be seen above, these studies mainly concentrate on hutongs in the political, economic, and cultural center of China, Beijing, leaving the toponymic landscape of other well-known ancient cities in China underexplored. Such a situation is further aggravated by the recent urbanization initiatives across China, during which the traditional urban dwelling patterns are increasingly diminishing, and the hutong is increasingly replaced by high-rise buildings and expansive boulevards (Campanella 2008). Against this backdrop, drawing upon prior onomastic research (Tent 2015), this study aims to ascertain hutong names in a Chinese city from a linguistic perspective. We hope that the present study will shed light on the underlying patterns of hutong names and increase people's awareness of local toponyms, thereby illuminating more evidence-based toponymic research in the context of China.

Methods

Research context

In this study, we took a convenience sampling strategy to collect data. Specifically, we chose to focus on the hutong names of Kaifeng 开封, where our research affiliation is located. The city of Kaifeng is situated to the south of the Yellow River in Central Henan province. It boasts a long history, spanning over 4,100 years. In the dynastic periods, it was made the imperial capital of eight dynasties, and at different points in history was once known as *Bianzhou* 汴州, *Bianliang* 汴梁, and *Bianjing* 汴京.

The city reached its zenith in the Northern Song 北宋 dynasty (960–1127 CE), as reflected in the painting *The Qingming Scroll* (Harvard University 2022). However, since it is adjacent to the Yellow River, it was subjected to severe flood problems and was destroyed several times. Despite constant natural disasters, the axis of the city has remained unchanged. The present-day city was rebuilt in the Qing Dynasty upon several underground predecessors, and has not undergone significant changes in its layout (Office of Local Chronicles in Kaifeng, 2022). Because of the unique developmental trajectory, hutong names that trace their roots to the Song dynasty are well preserved in this city (Storozum et al. 2020). Thus, Kaifeng is deemed an ideal site for the present study.

Data collection

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, we collected the hutong names of Kaifeng in two steps. First, we procured a list of hutong names from the local official directory and gazetteers (Office of Local Chronicles in Kaifeng, 2022). Next, we took field trips to verify their present-day location in the inner city. It should be noted that since the xiang was used interchangeably with the hutong in the Song Dynasty to denote an alleyway, both were taken into consideration during data collection. In the end, a total of 67 names were identified, and their exact location was marked on Google Maps[1]. Further, to deepen the understanding of the onomastic practices in this city, we also collected and analyzed 201 non-hutong names (names of *jie* 街 streets and *lu* 路 roads) in Kaifeng in tandem with the hutong names.

Data coding and analysis

Since the study aims to gain linguistic insights into hutong names in Kaifeng, we followed a topological approach recommended by Daniels (1999) to facilitate subsequent analyses of the hutong names at the phonetic, morphological, and semantic levels. Details about the coding schemes at the three levels are presented below.

First, in the phonetic analysis, considering that Mandarin Chinese is mostly syllable-based (i.e., one character usually corresponds to one syllable), the total syllables within each place name were calculated to compare their word length (Duanmu 2012). Next, Mandarin Chinese, as a specific tonal language, uses four distinctive tones: (1) *yinping* 阴平 'level tone', *yangping* 阳平 'rising tone', *shangseng* 上声 'falling rising tone', and *qusheng* 去声 'falling tone' to indicate different pitch patterns of syllables (Li & Ge 2017). These tones can be further classified into two categories, with the first two tones being *ping* 平 'level' and the latter two being *ze* 仄 'oblique'. According to Zhang (2015), the ping-ze contrast gives rise to tonal prosody in Chinese. Subsequently, these placenames are classified according to their tonal patterns for further analysis.

Second, since placenames usually consist of both specific elements and generic elements (Zinkin 1969), to avoid unnecessary repetition, we excluded the generic elements from morphological analysis; that is, xiang, hutong, jie, and lu were eliminated from the analysis. Next, to gain insights into the internal constituents of these specific elements, each independent character was coded in line with Packard's (2000) classification of Chinese morphemes, which include (1) root word, (2) bound root, (3) functional word, (4) word-forming affix, and (5) grammatical affix. In addition, the part of speech of each word component within a corresponding placename was appended.

Third, drawing upon Blair and Tent's (2021) taxonomy of placenames, the meaning of the specific terms was carefully examined with respect to the data collected from the field trips. Specifically, five criteria, including (1) descriptive, (2) emotive, (3) commemorative, (4) inherent, (5) onomastic, and (6) toponymic, were consulted to determine the semantic components each placename contains.

All data were imported into MS Excel and coded by the researchers individually. Subsequent group meetings were arranged by the researchers, who, after three rounds of discussions, reached a consensus regarding the coded data. Finally, data analysis was carried out at the predetermined three levels.[2]

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Results

Phonetic features

The descriptive analysis of the phonetic coding of the hutong names revealed the following results, where L stands for ping (level-type tones) and O stands for ze (oblique-type tones). In terms of their syllabic size, these polysyllabic hodonyms fall into three categories: 1) trisyllabic (n = 10; 14.93%), 2) quadrisyllabic (n = 38; 56.72%), and 3) pentasyllabic (n =19, 28.36%), with the most frequently used structure being quadrisyllabic. Next, the most frequent tonal patterns are L+L+L+O (n =10; 14.93%), O+L+L+O (n = 10; 14.93%), L+O+L+O (n = 9; 13.43%), and L+L+O (n = 8; 11.94%). Next, the analysis of the phonetic coding of the non-hutong names found the following results. The polysyllabic hodonyms also fall into three categories: 1) trisyllabic (n = 81; 40.30%), 2) quadrisyllabic (n = 92; 45.77%), and 3) pentasyllabic (n = 28, 13.93%), with the most frequently used structure also being quadrisyllabic. Moreover, the most common tonal patterns in this case include O+L+L (n =17; 8.46 %), L+L+L (n = 16; 7.96 %), and L+L+O+L (n = 16; 7.96%), O+L+L+L (n = 16; 7.96%).

Morphological features

In examining the morphological features of the independent characters, we found that the characters of hutong names fall into three of five types of morphemes as proposed by Packard (2000). The three identified categories are 1) root word (n = 47; 47.00%), 2) bound root (n = 32; 32.00%), and 3) word-forming affix (n =21; 21.00%), while the two missing categories are functional word and grammatical affixes.

Semantic features

Regarding the semantic analysis for hutong names, the results reveal that the hutong names, are mostly descriptive (n = 50; 74.63%) with less non-descriptive (n =17; 25.37%). The three most commonly-employed semantic elements of hutong names include 1) relational description (n = 19; 28.36%); 2) occupation and activity (n = 11; 16.42%); and 3) associated person and legend (n = 10; 14.93%). Similarly, the findings suggest that the non-hutong names are also mostly descriptive (n = 190; 94.53%) with a small portion being nondescriptive (n = 11; 5.47%). The three most commonly employed semantic elements of non-hutong names are 1) relational description (n = 104; 51.74%); 2) locational description (n = 46; 22.89%); 3) positive expectation (n = 30; 14.93%). Table 1 shows the details of the semantic analysis.

Table 1: The Semantic Components of Hutong and Non-hutong Names

Semantic Components	Frequency	%
Hutong Names (n = 67)		
+Descriptive −Emotive +Inherent	25	37.31
+Descriptive −Emotive −Inherent	20	29.85
−Descriptive +Commemorative +Onomastic −Toponymic	11	16.42
+Descriptive +Emotive +Evaluative	5	7.46
−Descriptive +Commemorative −Onomastic	3	4.48
−Descriptive +Commemorative +Onomastic	1	1.49
−Descriptive +Commemorative +Onomastic +Toponymic	1	1.49
−Descriptive −Commemorative	1	1.49
Non-hutong names (n = 201)		
+Descriptive −Emotive +Inherent	135	67.16
+Descriptive +Emotive +Evaluative	34	16.92
+Descriptive −Emotive −Inherent	21	10.45
−Descriptive +Commemorative +Onomastic −Toponymic	5	2.49
−Descriptive +Commemorative −Onomastic	4	1.99
−Descriptive +Commemorative +Onomastic +Toponymic	2	1.00

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Discussion

Resonating with Duanmu's (2012) empirical research on Chinese word-length preference, the results reveal that the syllabic size of the specific elements of Hutong names does not exceed five syllables. The length of hutong names would, in general, be within six characters, with four-character Hutong names being the most common, and hutong names with word length less than five characters accounting for a larger portion. Similar results regarding syllabic size and word length were also identified from the non-hutong names. Given the significant role of placenames in facilitating communication of location, this pattern may also be attributed to the word length effect; that is, people's working memory would be better at recalling short instead of long words (Y. Zhang & J. Zhang 2014; Zang et al. 2018). In addition, the results reveal that in both conditions, tonal patterns, which accord with the ping-ze principle, occur with high frequency. As is evidenced in prior research on Chinese tonal prosody (Zhang 2015; Goh 2004; Shen 1990), such findings may be linked to phonetic harmony deeply rooted in the Chinese language, which could exert an implicit influence upon people's choice of placenames.

Next, echoing previous studies on the morphological structures of proper names in other languages (Handschuh & Dammel 2019; Schlücker & Ackermann 2017; Long 1969), the findings demonstrate that the morphological features of placenames are relatively simple. Only three types of morphemes, including root words, bound words, and prefixes, frequently appear in hutong and non-hutong names, while the other two types of morphemes, including functional words and grammatical affixes are completely missing. Moreover, compounding and affixation are two recurring means underlying both hutong and non-hutong naming practices. These findings lend further support to similar studies on the morphological structures of toponyms in the future (Köhnlein 2015; Ursini 2017).

Finally, our findings show that the semantic components of hutong names and non-hutong names are, in general, in line with the typology of toponyms proposed by Blair and Tent (2021). Hutong names and non-hutong names are mostly descriptive and closely associated with geographical features of the nearby area. However, compared with the non-hutong names examined in this study, the semantic components of hutong names are slightly more diversified and semantically transparent. Hutong names often contain multiple layers of meaning, from personal connections to occupational, historical, and cultural references. From these details and references, people can learn about the specific features of the residential area. Non-hutong names, by comparison, tend to be more generic and more closely associated with spatial markers and certain desired traits.

Conclusion

The study aimed to gain linguistic insights into the underlying patterns of hutong names in Kaifeng. With growing attention to toponyms in China, such knowledge will not only enrich the growing literature on toponymic research, but also contribute to the toponymic awareness of the local people. In addition, it will be valuable to those interested in this important onomastic phenomenon in the context of China. This study also sheds light on studies of hutong names from a general linguistic perspective, offering an intriguing angle to explore hidden but crucial information in future research on Chinese toponyms.

The limitations of the study also need to be acknowledged. Due to the limited mobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was based on data collected from one city in China, which undoubtedly introduced significant limitations to its generalizability. Future research may consider adopting a larger and more balanced sampling strategy and appropriate statistical analysis to further elucidate the current study's findings.

Notes

[1] The map can be accessed at https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=11D_Fge4liIC_NRxFsVAILpb3hR6R1kc&usp=sharing

[2] The dataset for this study is openly available in FigShare at https://10.6084/m9.figshare.20406984

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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